Book Review


This book is a fascinating and detailed exploration of the contested meanings and political applications of the word ‘Christian’ in modern historical and contemporary America. Bowman skilfully navigates complex theological, philosophical, legal and political debates concerning issues of religion, race, slavery, materialism and democracy in an attempt to demonstrate that diverse interpretations of the relationship between Christianity and American civilisation result in essentially contested Christian understandings of how these problems ought to be addressed politically.

According to Bowman, the book ‘takes as a premise that talk about Christianity in America is essentially diverse and disputed’ (p. 4). The book consequently constructs a ‘history’ of Christian politics in America (at least from the late nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century), a ‘narrative constructed from a series of case studies that illustrate certain spans of the broad arc of Christian involvement in American politics’ (p. 11). For Bowman, this ‘malleability’ reveals that the term ‘Christian’ always ‘resists collapse into a single definition… it has no essential, normative meaning’; rather, it is an example of an ‘essentially contested concept’ (p. 3). Since Christianity ‘provides Americans with metaphysical justifications for political belief’, argues Bowman, ‘it allows them to root notions as diverse as human equality and white supremacy in supernatural claims about human nature and divine will’ (p. 4). There is ‘no single definition of Christianity’, and hence there is ‘no single consensus’ about which ‘Christian’ values take priority and how these values are to be precisely applied to political issues (p. 4).

The remainder of the book builds a narrative comprised of case studies that illustrate these ideas. These case studies traverse diverse Christian theologies such as Liberal Protestantism, Catholic Democracy, Black Nationalism, Counter-cultism, Civil Religion, and Evangelicalism.
displayed through the Religious Right and the Moral Majority. Bowman insightfully articulates the various ways these movements interacted, coalesced and conflicted in relation to significant political moments such as the conflict with Germany in the World Wars, the rise of Communism and the Cold War, the realisation of America’s systemic racism and the civil rights movement, and the arrival of secular humanism as a dominant force.

At the risk of quibbling, the case studies themselves are not clearly linked in the first few substantive chapters and the reader has to struggle to discern the common meanings or themes as they proceed. However, coherence does improve as the book progresses and a more precise narrative detailing the diversity of Christian politics in America clearly emerges. Furthermore, as is necessarily so with case studies, they are localised and specific and this undermines the comprehensiveness of Bowman’s narrative.

This alludes to a much more fundamental, substantive problem with the book’s argument. If one accepts the book’s initial premise, the case studies are useful illustrations. If not, the case studies risk appearing politically and theologically selective, especially as they are not comprehensive. The problem is the case studies only illustrate the premise; they do not prove it. More importantly, even if the premise is accepted, the resulting argument that Christianity is an essentially contested concept is highly questionable.

At one level the argument is too modest, almost trivial. That there is diversity in Christian politics is hardly disputed, and stems from the well-known diversity in Christian theology. Of course, different Christian approaches to theology, ethics and politics will have different emphases and priorities of values. But it does not follow from this diversity that Christianity has no single normative meaning or definition—this is a non sequitur.

At another level the argument is far too radical and proves too much. If diversity and debate within a framework prove that framework is essentially contested, then everything is essentially contested and nothing has any essential meaning. For example, after decades (centuries? millennia?) of debate about the notion of justice there is no consensus about what justice entails politically. Does it follow that justice is an essentially contested concept? Perhaps it does, but that does not imply there is no essential, normative meaning for justice in politics. It is arguably the same with Christianity, especially when one considers that Christianity (unlike ‘justice’) has a source of normative authority: Scripture.
There is limited consideration of Scripture as a source of normative authority for theology, ethics and politics in the book. There are fleeting mentions (e.g., pp. 98–100), and this textual vacuum may reflect the political discourse itself (p. 51), but the analytical omission remains in the context of a broader descriptive argument about the nature of Christianity. Bowman apparently does not recognise that a uniform source of normative authority such as Scripture implies that some theological or political ‘versions’ of Christianity are simply not sustainable. For example, the discussion of ‘Christian’ foundations for white supremacy and apartheid draw on Christian principles of salvation and separation (pp. 140–43), but these principles patently do not apply on the basis of race according to the text of the New Testament, which clearly describes Christ as reconciling nations and peoples. This challenges Bowman’s claim that Christianity is essentially contestable.

Despite these criticisms, the book is an informative, engaging and perceptive study. I recommend it to anyone interested in exploring the history of interactions between Christianity and politics in America as a frame for critiquing the political manifestations of Christianity in America today.

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